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ABSTRACT

The London Stage Information Bank (LSIB) is a machine-readable text of "The London Stage, 1660-1800," an 11-volume publication that contains information on plays, entertainments and afterpieces, casts, box-receipts, and contemporary comment compiled from playbills, newspapers, and theatrical diaries of the period. The LSIB can be searched by subject matter or by using any word, word root, or phrase in the corpus. "An Index to The London Stage," a 939 page reference book, has been produced using this information bank; and two microfiche guides containing information on the repertoires of all the actors on the London Stage and on the history of each role are planned. (MKM)

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WAYS IN WHICH LSIB CAN BE USED

Ben Ross Schneider, Jr.

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Ways in Which LSIB Can Be Used
ATA Convention, 1979

The London Stage Information Bank (hereafter referred to as LSIB) is a machine-readable text of The London Stage, 1660-1800, compiled by William Van Lennep, Emmett Avery, Arthur Scouten, George Winchester Stone, Jr, and Charles Beecher Hogan. It is a calendar in 11 volumes--8,026 pages, 75,000 entries--of all plays, entertainments and afterpieces, together with casts, box-receipts and contemporary comment, compiled from the playbills, newspapers, and theatrical diaries of the period. A typical page looks like this (slide please).

LSIB can search this text with two systems. The first atomizes all cast lists into individual records of each performance of something by someone at a theatre, giving the date, the theatre, the title of the piece, if any, the role, if any, the actor, if any, and the type of act. In other words, a record of the details is produced whenever a title, or an actor, or a role is mentioned. We can search for any theatre, date, title, role, actor, or type; we can then sort alphabetically by theatre, or actor, or role, or title, or numerically by date, or by all or some of these in ascending or descending order in any sequence. For example, we can provide an actor's repertoire sorted chronologically to show the succession of roles day by day in his whole career; or alphabetically and then chronologically, showing his day to day activity in one role at a time. Or we could give you a role history, sorted chronologically, or by theatre, or by actor, or by all of these at once.

Our first system also retrieves any items in commentary that have been marked and tagged as to category. We have marked and tagged all names and titles in commentary at this point, but can expand to other categories by further editing of the source. This system can also retrieve, sort, format and print an alphabetical index to theatres, names, titles, roles, actors, and tagged items.

By this means we have produced the now published Index to The London Stage. This 939-page work contains 500,000 referencees to 25,000 items, consisting of the titles of plays, songs, dances, musical pieces, operas, books, and pamphlets, and the names of performers, authors, composers, theatre staff, members of the audience, cities, countries, societies, streets, coffee-houses, whether in cast lists or commentary. The Index is cross-referenced from variant to standard versions of names and titles, and from title to author.

Our second means of access to this machine-readable text is not tied to particular categories. Basically, it is an electronic concordance. With this software we can search for any word, word root, or phrase in the whole corpus. All one has to know to find out what the source contains is on any topic is the words associated with it. If one knows one of the words, by browsing you can find others. For example if you search for " scen" (this will get you "scenic", "scenery", and "scene", but not "obscene"), you will find all of the passages containing this root. You will discover, on perusing these passages, that The London Stage also uses the word "decorations" in the context of scenery, and you can then search for all passages containing this word as well. In other words, our second means of access is theoretically capable of delivering information on anything in the 8,026 pages of the calendar.

Here follows a partial list of some of the subjects on which LSIB can provide information by one or both of these systems:

Theatrical research: Repertoires of actors; histories of roles (Shylock, for example); histories of theatres; on-stage biographies of actors; trends in offerings; audience behavior; patronage; benefit system; animal acts, acrobats, freaks; popular songs; stage's response to political events (suppressing Venice Preserved during the American Revolution), occasions for God Save Great George Our King, The Roast Beef of Old England; popularity of Shakespeare plays, farces, bassoons, salt-boxes, peasants, Dutch wooden shoes, Irish howls, drunken dances; Handel favorites; 18th century opera, music, composers, performers, instruments; the growth of the exclamation point in play titles.

Social and historical research: coffee-houses; actors' housing; favorite charities (benefits for Lying-In Hospital); Masonic activity.

Geography: streets and house numbers in 18th Century London; English attitudes to Scots, Italians, American Indians, Indians, American Colonies, Irish, Turks; foreign actors and foreign topics in London.

History of English Language: development of vocabulary, spelling and syntax during the 18th century.

Economic History: prices of tickets, silk, wigs, lace, candles, paper; trades (89 of the 96 trades listed in The London Tradesman in 1747 appear in The London Stage).

Besides information, the two software systems I have described are available for other projects that are involved with making and searching lists of things, like calendars, bibliographies, catalogues, directories, and so forth. The first works with pre-selected categories in a list of hierarchically-structured entries from which it extracts records matching items in one or several categories. It can also convert such records to a conventional index showing all locations of references to the retrieved items. It is called GWSJR and it is written in the programming language PL/1. The second, called SITAR, (System for Interactive Text-editing, Analysis and Retrieval) not only operates as the electronic concordance described above, but performs all basic word-processing operations and is an easy-to-use system for editing text on a video terminal, where insertions, deletions, and writeovers appear on the screen instantly when they are typed. SITAR is not restricted to lists and is good for entering, editing, searching, formatting and printing any kind of text: letters, books, articles, reports, memoranda, etc. Finally, I can offer experience. I have become deeply involved in the whole computer business. I have put some of the the trials and tribulations of conducting a computer project into a book called Travels in Computerland: or, Incompatibilities and Interfaces: a True and Faithful Account of the Implementation of The London Stage Project by a Professor of English (Addison/Wesley 1975). A short version of the struggle occurs in the introduction to the published

Index to The London Stage (Southern Illinois Press 1979) If I had to put all my accumulated experience into one word of advice, I would say, "Don't believe anyone." Find out for yourself what is the best way to solve the problem. Above all, don't believe the people in your computer center. They are business and science-oriented, and they will probably set you to work punching cards. No human being needs to punch any cards anymore. If I had punched cards I would now have a file of them as long as a football field, not counting three rejects for every correct one.

Now comes the burning question: "How much has LSIB been used?" The machine-readable source and the systems for serving it have been available for three years now and the answer is, "Not at all." I have sent out seven newsletters to a thousand addresses; notices and progress reports have appeared in 14 scholarly journals. In response to this publicity, I have received 126 requests for further information. 34 of these enquirers have asked for specific sets of information and requested cost estimates (which ranged from $50 to $250). None of these 34 has carried the matter any farther. 18th century theatre research is not a neglible segment of scholarly activity. One whole journal is devoted to it. Bibliographies show that approximately 100 books and articles which could have or should have used LSIB are published annually. I estimate that perhaps as many as 500 scholars regularly publish in the field.

London Stage software, which has been described and offered in these academic journals, in project newsletters, in the printed Index, in two computer magazines, and in two international software directories has netted 72 enquiries, but all of them from computer professionals, none from academics. Although the cost of this software is minimal, there are no takers. And though a dozen or so scholars embarked on similar projects have asked for my personal advice, not many have taken it.

What is my diagnosis of this phenomenon? For some reason, almost everyone would rather write software from scratch than get it at a fraction of the cost ready-made, thoroughly tested and debugged. I sense that the computer professionals who wanted to know about SITAR were already engaged in developing word-processing systems and they wrote me for details only to insure that they had overlooked nothing important in their design. But what about the academics? It does not seem to occur to scholars embarked for the first time on computer projects that what they want to do has ever been done before. I know this from reading grant proposals. Furthermore, using someone else's software takes all the excitement out of computing. Still, we don't insist on building our own typewriters and lawnmowers. When special-purpose software is as common as other tools, people will use ready-made products, and businesses nowadays have come to realize that it's cheaper to buy it than to create it.

As for the vast riches of The London Stage, now extractable for a pittance, I am not so sure. One never finds out why a person doesn't take one's offer. For one thing, I suspect that the published calendar and index provide or seem to provide pretty stiff competition. Certainly it is faster to count the entries for Hamlet in the printed

index than to go to LSIB for it. But scanning all that territory for actors' repertoires or theatre offerings and some of the other topics I've suggested is much more boring and time-consuming. Still, it's the traditional way to go about it, and it will do, as long as no-one else in the field is making use of the greater accuracy and comprehensiveness of computer methods. Furthermore an intimidating hurdle stands in the way. So many of my colleagues tell me, "I know I could use the computer in my work. Someday I'll have to sit down and learn all about computers." Well, for such persons life always turns out to be too short for what seems like major retooling. I say "seems like," because figuring out how to do something with a computer isn't hard to do if you know how to do it by yourself. The hurdle is truly imaginary.

I suspect also that the potential market for LSIB suffers from a blind spot. Finally, most of research that goes on in theatre history today is precisely the kind of thing one can do just as well without the computer. At the point where a good computer printout of the repertoires of all the actors who played Shylock might reveal a great deal about the staging of The Merchant of Venice, it would never occur to a writer on that subject (or to his reader) that the question deserved further research in the form of a complete list of all the roles of all the actors of Shylock. The kind of thing you can now do by computer is not the kind of thing that anyone ever did, or felt the need to do. But the computer-accessible on information is there, it will shed new light and shatter old opinions, and it will be used. The time-lag between a break-through in technology and its full effect is always great. It wasn't until the 18th century that the printing press came into power; but the medium is always the message for those who can read it.

In an attempt to interest the scholarly community in LSIB I plan two courses of action. The first is simply to publish some papers that will show the kinds of things that can be done with it. One would be a survey of the major trends in theatre offerings during the period. The results will not jibe with current opinions, based on developements in the contents of plays. Plays that seem remarkable to us did not fare so well in their own time, and some plays that aren't even listed in textbooks were blockbusters, as I believe an exhaustive computer survey will show.

My second response to the un-use of this $200,000 data base, will be to offer some basic arrangements of information on microfiche. Those who balk at using computers for theatrical research should be more at home with an accepted technology. Further fiche editions can be produced at a price an individual scholar can easily afford. Two basic sets of data suggest themselves for publication on fiches. One would show the repertoires of all the actors on the London Stage and the other would show the history of each role, as it passed from actor to actor during the century. With the second set of fiches, a scholar could find out who played a given role during the period and with the first, what kind of actors they were. I believe that these two sets of fiches could be published for about $50 each, a bargain in today's book market, and that the two sets would provide answers to a great many different kinds

of questions and show scholars how to get more sophisticated aggregates of information from LSIB.

M diagnosis of the non-use of London Stage products and my proposals for dealing with it are frankly shots in the dark. As I have suggested already, the ailure of the world to beat a path to my door is truly a mystery to me. dence I welcome your advice and counsel.